A Long-Awaited Visit: President Heber J. Grant in Switzerland and Germany, 1937

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FIG. 1. President Heber J. Grant standing in front of the mission home in Basel, Switzerland, probably July 4, 1937. After delays caused by the Depression and pressing duties at home, President Grant was finally able to tour missions in several European countries. While there, he encouraged the Saints as they faced an uncertain future. The images in this article are selected from a collection of thirty-one photographs that chronicle President Grant’s 1937 visit to Germany and Switzerland. Several of these photographs are previously unpublished.
A Long-Awaited Visit
President Heber J. Grant in Switzerland and Germany, 1937

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Marc Alain Bohn

In 1937, just two years before Hitler invaded Poland, President Heber J. Grant made a memorable journey from Salt Lake City to Europe (fig. 1). President Grant had served as president of the European and British Missions from 1903 to 1906 and was now returning to Europe as prophet of the Church. He was the second Church President to visit Europe while serving in that capacity. His predecessor, Joseph F. Smith, visited Europe in 1906 and again in 1910. ¹

Although the close succession of President Smith’s two visits probably raised hopes among the European Saints that such frequent visits would continue, circumstances prevented any Church President from traveling to Europe again until 1937. The worldwide depression, for example, had forced President Grant to concentrate his efforts on saving the Church and its members from economic catastrophe while maintaining the Church’s missionary effort, temple work, and daily affairs.

Finally, the centennial of the 1837 founding of the British Mission² provided President Grant a reason to visit Europe that temporarily superseded his duties at home. Despite his nearly eighty-one years, the prophet was eager to make the arduous journey to fulfill the Saints’ righteous desire to hear the voice of the Lord’s anointed.

Before joining the Saints in the British Isles for their celebrations—scheduled for late July and early August 1937—President Grant went directly to the continent and spoke to the American Club of Paris on June 24, 1937.³ His talk was published in the prestigious Paris edition of the New York Herald Tribune newspaper.⁴ He then met with the Saints and others in the French, Swiss-German, Czechoslovakian, and German-Austrian missions as well as with the media and government officials.

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Following the festivities in the British Isles, President Grant’s party returned to the continent to visit several more missions, passing through the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. While in the Netherlands, they stopped at the International Boy Scout Jamboree. They returned to the United States on September 4.5

While the history of each of these European missions makes special note of his visit, President Grant’s travels in Switzerland and Germany were particularly well documented by a series of photographs offering a rare glimpse of President Grant among the German-speaking Saints. A selection of those photographs is published here, several for the first time.6

Historical Context of the Photographs

President Grant left Salt Lake City on June 13, 1937,7 accompanied by his personal secretary, Joseph Anderson; Sunday School general superintendent George D. Pyper; and recently appointed British Mission president Hugh B. Brown. A few days later, they boarded the Canadian Pacific
steam liner *Empress of Australia* for the journey across the Atlantic, landing at Cherbourg Harbor on the northernmost tip of France the evening of June 22, 1937. The party disembarked the following day and was greeted by Elder Richard R. Lyman, a member of the Twelve Apostles and the current president of the European Mission, by French Mission president Octave F. Ursenbach, and by several others.

Following a visit to Paris, France, and Liege, Belgium (headquarters of the French Mission), President Grant’s party made its way to Switzerland, finally arriving in Basel (headquarters of the Swiss-German Mission) on June 28, 1937. Swiss-German Mission president Philemon M. Kelly, along with his wife and a few others, greeted President Grant at the train station. Upon arriving, President Grant reflected that it had been about thirty-three years since he last visited “this lovely land.” President and Sister Kelly hosted the visitors in the mission home, where the group enjoyed a brief break from traveling.

The next day, President Grant left Basel (fig. 2) for the French-speaking regions of Switzerland. President Kelly remained behind to continue his labors in Basel. President Grant spent the next three days visiting local congregations of Saints before leaving Geneva on July 1 for Neuchâtel, Switzerland. President Kelly joined the party to begin a tour of the Swiss-German Mission on July 2, and President Ursenbach returned to Liege.

The party then left Neuchâtel for Berne, Switzerland.
President Grant recorded these impressions of Berne in his journal following his arrival:

We went to one place where we could obtain a fine view of the city—it was a beautiful park. . . . Everybody seemed content and happy. One is profoundly impressed with the industry and the contentment of the people. . . . Nearly every building in Berne has flowers in the windows, particularly geraniums—homes and business places.\textsuperscript{13}

While in Berne, President Grant spoke to several hundred Saints and guests and participated in interviews with “all the newspaper men from the largest [local] newspapers.” Swiss-German Mission records noted that “in Bern [sic] a very favorable impression was made.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact, President
Grant’s positive experience with reporters in Switzerland and elsewhere during his European tour was one of the most important and successful aspects of his 1937 travels in Europe. As he recounted in a general conference talk that October, what impressed him most “profoundly” on this tour was “the marvelous change” in the attitude of the European press toward the Church since his mission in 1903–1906. During those three years, he recalled, “some of the vilest, most wicked, obscene, terrible things were published regarding us.” This time, however, there were only “favorable newspaper notices in Germany, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, in Holland and in Belgium. No criticism of any kind or description.” He concluded, “I rejoice in these things. It is such a marvelous change from the spirit of animosity and almost hatred that I found among newspaper men that I came in contact with over thirty years ago.”

The meetings in Switzerland provided many of the Saints their first opportunity to see and hear a Church President in person, so they were eager to take advantage of the visit. Hans Rindlisbocher, a local Latter-day Saint serving in the Swiss military at the time, told his superiors that he had an important employment interview, an excuse he hoped would allow him to hear President Grant. Hans was granted leave. Brother Rindlisbocher recalled, “It was very important for the members to see the President of the Church, and for me it was very important too, even if I had to lie [to be able to attend]. I was able to go and meet him and shake hands with him. That was the most important thing.” He also said that President Grant’s visit helped the Saints to endure because “he gave us something to improve ourselves. He gave an inspirational talk. I’m sure he strengthened the membership of the Church.”

In his history of the Church in Switzerland, Christian Gräub summarizes the message to the Saints that President Grant repeated in Basel, Zürich, and Frankfurt:

Central to his talks, stood on the one hand his testimony of the Book of Mormon and on the other hand a treatment of the Articles of Faith. Concerning the Book of Mormon he related how he read this book for the first time as a boy: “From that time to this day I have always had a strong testimony that the Book of Mormon truly is that which it purports to be: the Word of God to the ancient inhabitants of America.”

President Grant also testified of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

“I am very happy to leave with you my testimony that I know without a shadow of a doubt that Joseph Smith restored the true gospel under God’s direction and that we can again today participate in all of the blessings of the original Church of Jesus Christ. I know that the tree lives and
bears good fruit, and why do I know this? Because I have stretched out my hand and picked and eaten the fruit.”

President Grant’s party returned to Basel “using a bus which took them through Thun, Interlaken, Brünig and Luzern, the most beautiful area in Switzerland; the train then took them from Luzern to Basel shortly after 8 o’clock in the evening.” This trip through the Berner Oberland, a region of lakes, quaint villages, agriculturally rich valleys, and awe-inspiring alpine peaks, was led by Brother Hans Balmer of Interlaken.

During this scenic journey, President Grant lamented, “There has been no day since I left home when I regretted more that my wife [Augusta Winters Grant] and my daughter Lucy [Grant Cannon] were not with me.” He was so impressed with the scenery near Interlaken, in fact, that during general conference the following October he described the Alps as he had seen them from the train:

The clouds disappeared just before we reached the highest point on the railroad, and we could see five or six of those great towering mountains, covered with snow... We were very grateful for that wonderful, magnificent sight, second only of course to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

On Sunday, July 4, the morning after their return to Basel, President Grant and his fellow travelers were greeted by a surprise from the local members. According to Der Stern, the Church’s German-language periodical, some twenty young women from the Basel Ward “gathered early at the mission home to serenade the guests: They sang traditional Swiss songs as well as Church hymns and gave the visitors little gifts as a sign of gratitude and happiness for this long-desired visit. The guests were visibly touched by this unexpected honor” (fig. 4).

A photograph in the album shows these young Swiss women surrounding Presidents Grant, Kelly, Lyman, Brown, and secretary Anderson (fig. 4). Receptions like this one certainly must have added to the feelings that President Grant expressed to a group of Saints later in the day:

“I am really very happy that I, by the goodness of God, am allowed to meet with you, beloved brothers and sisters. Three times have I already reserved a place on a steamer to travel to Europe, but every time something came up so that I finally said to my assistants: ‘Until I find myself actually swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, I don’t think I’ll get to Europe,’ I can hardly hope to return here again to Europe, but yet I hope it.”

On this Sabbath day, President Grant addressed two different groups. Attendance at both meetings totaled over seven hundred, many of them from southern Germany. Describing these meetings, President Grant
wrote in his journal that Anderson, Brown, Kelly, and Lyman spoke briefly, but “I spoke about 50 minutes enjoying liberty... At the morning meeting there were a great many flowers, and two little children presented bouquets to all of the visiting brethren.”

28 A number of photographs were taken at these meetings (figs. 5, 6).

These sermons in Basel were not only well attended by members of the Church but also were covered by the local press. Basel’s daily newspaper, the National Zeitung, reported the proceedings of the July 4 meetings and wrote glowingly of President Grant: “[He] has remained, despite his 81 years, a colossal figure who could present himself as well in the saddle as he does at the pulpit; his graying hair and white beard encircle his mild visage from which, despite his energy, true Christian goodness is expressed.” The newspaper also reported President Grant’s “fascination with the immaculate cleanliness” and with the “rich greenness and glorious flowers” of Switzerland.

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FIG. 5. President Grant addressing the Saints in Basel, Switzerland, with Max Zimmer translating, July 4, 1937. The Swiss flag hangs behind President Grant.

FIG. 6. President Grant with the priesthood holders at Basel, Switzerland, July 4, 1937. Identifiable individuals (front row, left to right): President Brown (third from the left, holding flowers), Brother Feh, Walter Ruf, Alfred Niederhauser Sr., Alfred Niederhauser Jr., President Grant, President Lyman, President Kelly, and Marel Chappuis. President Grant’s journal records that the two children in front gave flowers to all the Church leaders.
On July 5, local members dressed in native costumes sang Swiss songs in a program held for President Grant on the Basel Mission home grounds. According to President Grant’s journal, he apparently favored these Swiss Saints with a performance of his own: “I told some of my experiences in learning to sing, and sang two or three numbers.”

On July 6, President Grant traveled to Zürich, where he was scheduled to speak again. Upon arriving, however, he and his companions first took time away from their hectic traveling schedule to relax with a nap and a boat ride on Lake Zürich (fig. 7).

From Zürich, President Grant and his party traveled back through Basel and on to Frankfurt, Germany, to address a large gathering of Saints on the evening of July 8. Members congregated from six districts—Frankfurt, Ruhr, Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, München, and Nürnberg—to hear President Grant speak. Many Saints traveled several hours for the opportunity to hear the prophet.

Fig. 7. President Grant taking a boat ride on one of Switzerland’s glacial lakes, possibly Lake Zürich, July 6, 1937. Although the album notes that this photograph was taken on Lake Geneva, that information does not seem correct. In his personal journal, President Grant records two boat rides, one on Lake Geneva while traveling to meet President Kelly (July 1) and the other for leisure on Lake Zürich (July 6). The Church archivist who transcribed these sections of President Grant’s journal believed that this particular photograph was taken on the leisure trip.
The general meeting for members of the Church and friends was held later that evening (fig. 8). A missionary who attended those meetings noted in his journal that “there were about 870 people present at the meeting, one of the largest group [sic] of saints that have Ever came [sic] together in Europe.” Presidents Brown, Lyman, and Kelly all spoke before President Grant, who addressed the members at around nine o’clock. President Grant spoke for almost an hour about the Book of Mormon, the Articles of Faith, and “the first principles of the Gospel.” Afterward, he visited and shook hands “for nearly an hour” with the people attending the meeting.

Many freedoms had been dramatically curtailed in Nazi Germany, including religious freedoms. In this context, President Grant reported in October general conference how “very remarkable” it was that they had
had “perfect liberty in the holding of our meetings in Germany, notwithstanding the fact that more than thirty different denominations have been prohibited from preaching there.”

President Grant and his companions spent the night in a local hotel before leaving for Prague, Czechoslovakia, the following day. En route, they changed trains in Nürnberg, Germany (fig. 9), where a group of about thirty Latter-day Saints and missionaries greeted them. The party spent the next several days in the Czechoslovakian Mission before returning to Germany for a tour of the German-Austrian Mission. On July 12, they visited Hamburg and then made their way to Dresden, Breslau, and Berlin.

The physical presence of the prophet had a profound effect upon the Saints in Europe. Mirjam Schirm recalls that when President Grant visited the Interlaken Ward in 1937 “the respectful character of the prophet impressed painter Arthur Hodel so much that he painted a portrait of him.” When Hodel finished the painting the following year, he presented it to the Interlaken Ward, where it hung “until shortly after the death of President Heber J. Grant in 1945. Later, when the ward changed location to the

Fig. 9. President Grant and President Lyman visiting with the Saints as they prepare to leave the train station, Nürnberg, Germany, July 9, 1937. A group of about thirty-five Saints and missionaries greeted them at the station.
Rugenaustrasse, the picture went along and continued . . . to please the members and to remind them of the visit of a prophet.” Sister Schirm continues, “The deep and sincere glance of Heber J. Grant seems, to me, to continue warning: Take the speakers’ words seriously—remember the message of the prophet—your Savior lives!”

Conclusion

President Grant’s trip to the British Isles and continental Europe in 1937 was a milestone in Church history for the region. It gave the Church increased visibility in countries where growth had slowed considerably, and it allowed President Grant to determine personally what changes would best befit the European missions at the time. An immediate administrative change resulting from this tour of Switzerland and Germany was the creation of a third mission for German-speaking countries. More importantly, however, the visit had a profound effect on the lives of President Grant, those traveling with him from Utah, and the European Saints, missionaries, and others who heard the words of a prophet.

The Swiss-German Mission manuscript history concludes that this European trip “was both inspiring and instructive. During his stay in the Swiss-German Mission, Pres. Grant made many friends, both members of the Church and non-members.” He bore his testimony “in every branch, and consequently fulfilled the dreams of the German Saints. They had seen the man who stood at the head of the Church.”

President Grant also long remembered the reception he was given at their hands. Upon his return to the United States, President Grant said:

“It melted my heart to find how anxious the people who are in those countries are to see the Authorities of the Church. . . . I feel really and truly ashamed of myself that I have neglected so long returning to that part of the flock. They are just as much a part of this Church as we are. . . . If the Lord spares my life, I am not going to wait very long before going back again.”

With the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, President Grant was unable to return to Europe as he had hoped. He died quietly in Salt Lake City in May 1945 just as hostilities in Europe concluded. The memory of his visit, however, helped to spiritually sustain the European Saints during the dark years of conflict, death, and destruction. Edith Schade, a German Latter-day Saint, explained the impact she felt President Grant’s visit had on younger European members like her: “Two years later the Second World War broke out and we, by our having met President Grant, received
stronger testimonies of the truth and tried harder to better understand and keep the commandments.\textsuperscript{43}

President Grant recognized the need to expand Church programs and opportunities to the European Saints, something his successors followed up on. After the war, the Church sent large shipments of aid to the Saints in Europe. President George Albert Smith called Elder Ezra Taft Benson, a newly ordained Apostle, on a year-long European mission to lead the effort to save Church members and friends from starvation and to begin to rebuild the Church in Europe.\textsuperscript{44}

In 1952, President David O. McKay became the third Church President to visit the European Saints in their own lands. During subsequent years, he visited several times, and in 1955 he dedicated Europe’s first temple—a temple near Berne, Switzerland.\textsuperscript{45}

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5. Heber J. Grant, in 108th Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1937), 2–3, 6–8; Sorensen, “President Grant on Tour of Europe,” 1.
6. The collection is contained in a well-preserved, cloth-bound album currently housed in the Latter-day Saint Church Archives in Salt Lake City. It is not clear exactly how or when the Archives acquired the album, although William W. Slaughter, Church photo-archivist, says that the album may have been donated by the Swiss-German Mission. The 9.5” x 6.63” album has thirty-four black pages.
(the last seventeen of which are blank) containing thirty-one black-and-white photographs from President Grant’s travels in Switzerland and Germany. Some of the images have ragged edges (fig. 2), and others have a clean-cut border, suggesting different photographers.

Throughout the album, notes provide details about photographs (dates and locations), the handwriting of which corresponds to similar notes inscribed on the backs of the photographs themselves. These notes suggest that someone removed from the situation prepared the album because some of the inscriptions incorrectly date the photographs as August (President Grant was in Switzerland and Germany in July) and because there is at least one site-identification problem (see fig. 7). The collection of images includes pictures from Berne, Basel, and Zürich (Switzerland); from Nürnberg and Frankfurt am Main (Germany); and from one other site in the German Third Reich, probably Hamburg.

8. Sorensen, “President Grant on Tour of Europe,” 1.
13. Switzerland Zurich [Swiss and German] Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports, July 2, 1937, vol. 9, Switzerland Zurich Mission collection, Church Archives. After President Grant returned home in 1937, the Switzerland Zurich Mission was created. The Swiss-German Mission records are now a part of the Switzerland Zurich Mission history at Church Archives.
17. Grant, in 108th Semi-Annual Conference of the Church, 8.

Others who recall hearing President Grant during his visit have also specifically mentioned his testimony regarding the Articles of Faith:

We, like many other members, . . . were very delighted that he spoke about the thirteen Articles of Faith of the Church. We could now truly better understand them and recognize their importance.
... We all, including our children, began memorizing the Articles of Faith as a result of this visit....

... After 1937 the church also put out a thin, but significant, pamphlet that was called “The Articles of Faith” compiled by Heber J. Grant. (Edith [Schade] Krause to Marc Alain Bohn, August 22, 2003)

22. Rindlisbocher, interview.
33. Elder Bertis Lloyd Embry, a missionary serving near Essen, Germany, at the time, describes in his journal his extraordinary efforts to organize the many Saints from his area for the trip to Frankfurt to hear the prophet. Elder Embry and the members from the Essen area traveled almost seven hours to get to the meeting on July 8. Bertis Lloyd Embry, Journal, July 5 and 8, 1937, typescript, Missionary Journals November 1935–July 1938, Church Archives.
38. Grant, in 108th Semi-Annual Conference of the Church, 4.
39. Gräub, Chronik, 240, translated by Peacock. Another member also recalled that the Nazis asked the members to remove a picture of President Grant in a German meetinghouse because he “was supposedly a Jew.” Krause to Bohn, August 22, 2003.
42. Heber J. Grant, quoted in Hinckley, Heber J. Grant: Highlights, 146. President J. Reuben Clark Jr., representing a League of Nations committee on International Loan Contracts in Berlin, took time from a busy diplomatic schedule to visit members of the Church as a member of the First Presidency in August 1937. See Scharffs, Mormonism in Germany, 89; and “Präsident J. Ruben Clark in unsern Missionen,” Der Stern 69 (September 1–15, 1937): 258.
43. Krause to Bohn, August 22, 2003. See similar sentiments in Der Stern’s “Ein lang erwarteter Besuch,” 215; and “Präsident J. Ruben Clark,” 258.
